

# Feik's Following

## Cadets Benefit From Female Aviator's Experiences



**M**ore than 70 years ago, a father's love and a girl's geographic good fortune ignited a golden aviation career.

Today, at 82, Col. Mary Feik's true love is CAP cadets, to whom she imparts courage, wisdom and knowledge.

An engineer, mechanic and pilot, Feik grew up in New York near Curtiss-Wright Corp. and Bell Aircraft.

When she was 7, a Curtiss "Jenny" hummed overhead, and the eager youth asked her father if she could fly with the barnstormer. He consented, and, although the news caused her mother to faint, a legendary career was born.

A few years later, after Feik's father trusted her to assist with the family's auto business, the youth began welding at 11 and she overhauled her first engine at 13.

But not everyone believed in Feik.

"I wasn't accepted in the engineering department at the University of Buffalo because I was a girl, but my dad found out about this job with the Air Corps

teaching aircraft maintenance.

"He got the paperwork for me, made me fill it out and then he sent it in. And in two days I got a telegram that the Air Corps had hired me," said Feik.

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Feik flew all of the aircraft in formation above: From left, the P-38 Lightning, the P-47 Thunderbolt, the P-63 King Cobra and the P-51 Mustang. Of all the aircraft she soared in, the Mustang was far and away her favorite. She flew over 400 hours in the famous fighter.

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*"You talk about tears. This was a total surprise. I was sitting at the table with some cadets, and then these three young men come up and they say, 'Col. Feik, we're going to sing a love song to you.'"*

*Col. Mary Feik*

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The news launched an incredibly exciting and wholly unique career for Feik, who went on to soar for hundreds of hours in military aircraft; fly cross country in more than a dozen other historic aircraft; develop one of the earliest flight simulators; and help restore storied aircraft like the Enola Gay.

Feik combined her skills in mechanics, engineering and writing to become lead developer of Captivair simulators at bases across the country and the author of Captivair training manuals. She developed the first Captivair simulator, a P-51C Mustang, herself, and a P-80 Shooting Star that a reporter christened “Mary’s Little Lamb.” Captivair, a shortened word for “captive airplane,” was used to describe the system she designed that used military aircraft as flight trainers on the ground.

She also wrote specifications and engineering analyses for many other Captivairs she developed at other bases.

To be able to write training manuals and troubleshoot problems on aircraft, she became a P-51 and P-80 pilot and a B-29 Superfortress flight engineer and pilot.

Feik loved it all — not just the thrill of flight, but also the camaraderie, fellowship and knowledge she gained from her colleagues, like air racer and Lockheed test pilot Tony LeVier.

For cross-country flights, she often picked her own airplane to fly: an A-26 Invader, P-61 Black Widow, you name it.

To top it off, she became the first woman engineer in research and development in the Air Technical Service Command’s Engineering Division.

After about 20 years as a civilian military engineer, Feik was hired by the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum to restore historic aircraft like the Spad XIII, the famous French World War I biplane. She retired there as a restoration specialist.

But the woman who launched in her first P-51 Mustang at 19 isn’t resting on her laurels.

These days, she crisscrosses the country, not in search of glory, but to honor and congratulate CAP cadets with a ribbon named in her honor.

## Passing the Torch

Feik’s storybook-like life is an aviation treasure chest of knowledge for CAP cadets, especially those who earn the Mary Feik Achievement Ribbon for becoming a cadet senior airman. Feik travels across the nation to present this ribbon, and she draws on her background as a mechanic, engineer and restorer to teach her cadets about aircraft design and history.

For Feik, there’s nothing better than a cadet peppering her with questions on an airplane’s design. “That’s the fun part — this interchange, this question and answer and quizzing,” she said.

## Old-Fashioned Love Song

But the fun’s not all Feik’s. The cadets love her and enjoy learning from her.

If Feik didn’t know of their appreciation earlier, it became clear during the recent CAP Honor Guard Academy held at McDaniel College near Baltimore.

Feik traveled there to share her story and to personally confer a copy of her achievement ribbon on more newly christened senior airmen.

The trip included a very special surprise.

“You talk about tears,” said Feik. “I was sitting at the table with some cadets, and then these three young men come up and say, ‘Col. Feik, we’re going to sing a love song to you.’”

“This was a group of men singing to their lady. I was just so thrilled with this gift. I was mesmerized,” she said.

## Life Comes Full Circle

Feik has taught her whole life, but when she started, she instructed her peers, who were crew chiefs, mechanics and pilots.

As she grew older, her students became younger; now her pupils are CAP cadets, essentially Feik’s age when her father inspired her to become an aircraft maintenance instructor.

She enjoys the opportunity to pass on her father’s wisdom.

“My father gave me four things to remember, and this is what I tell the cadets because it worked for me: First of all, ‘Always be a lady; don’t be one of the guys’;

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## FLYIN' FEIK

To determine flight, maintenance and safety training requirements on aircraft, Col. Mary Feik ultimately flew just about every military aircraft imaginable.

### Fighters

- P-51 Mustang (North American)
- P-47 Thunderbolt (Republic)
- P-38 Lightning (Lockheed)
- P-63 King Cobra (Bell)
- P-61 Black Widow (Northrop)

### Jets

- P-80 Shooting Star (Lockheed)
- T-33 T-Bird (based on the design of the P-80 with a stretched fuselage to accommodate a second pilot — used for flight training)

### Attack Aircraft

- A-26 Invader (Douglas)

### Bombers

- B-17 Flying Fortress (Boeing)
- B-24 Liberator (Consolidated)
- B-25 Mitchell (North American)
- B-26 Marauder (Martin)
- B-29 Superfortress (Boeing); flew both as pilot and flight engineer

### Cargo

- C-47 Dakota (Douglas)
- C-46 Commando (Curtiss)
- C-121 Constellation (Lockheed)
- C-82 Packet (Fairchild)
- C-119 Flying Boxcar (Fairchild)

### Glider

- CG-4A Waco (flew test flight with new synthetic fiber tow rope to determine changes in flight training)



A U.S. military test pilot speaks with Feik before her first solo flight in the P-80 "Shooting Star" in the mid-1940s.



Back in the saddle again in 2003 at a tri-wing encampment, Feik sits in an A-10 Thunderbolt II at Warfield Air National Guard Base in Baltimore.

Cadets, from left, Brian Rickman of Connecticut, Taylor Anderson of Oregon and Zachary King of New Jersey flank

Feik in 2006 after singing her a love song of appreciation.

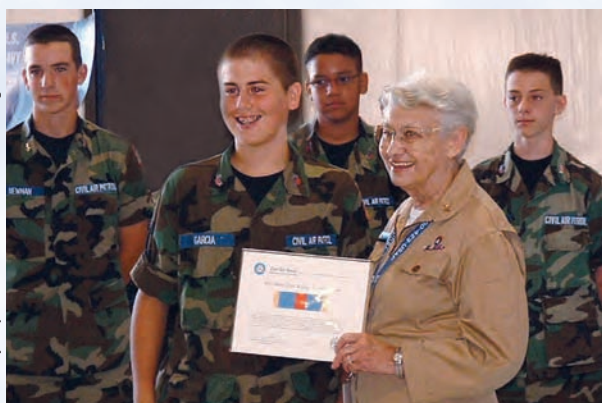


Photo by Maj. Loucandy Ball, Rocky Mountain Region





Cadets with Feik's Annapolis Composite Squadron in Maryland surround her during a break from a weekly meeting in 2004. Feik, a strong supporter of the Civil Air Patrol Cadet Program, travels throughout the country to present cadets who become senior airmen with the Mary Feik Achievement Ribbon.



Cadet Jordan Garcia of the Utah Wing's Sevier Valley Composite Squadron receives the Mary Feik Achievement Ribbon from Feik during her visit to Hill Air Force Base, Utah, in 2006.

Restoration of a French Spad XIII biplane — shown in this 1987 photo — was a favorite project for Feik. She restored the plane while employed at the Smithsonian Institution's Paul E. Garber Restoration facility in Suitland, Md.



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and I tell the gentlemen of the cadet corps, 'Always be gentlemen; don't be one of the guys'; secondly, 'Always be competent; don't be afraid to say you don't know, but find the answer and share it'; thirdly, 'Be a team player'; and 'If you give respect, you get respect,'" said Feik.

Based on her life, Feik's father's wisdom has paid off.

Feik's desire is to see all CAP cadets find similar fruitfulness in their careers and lives.

"The last thing my dad said to me was, 'Aim high and follow your dreams,' and when I give my ribbon to the kids, that's what I tell them," she said. ▲

## FEIK'S CAREER

- Credited with becoming the first woman engineer in research and development in the Air Technical Service Command's Engineering Division at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio.
- Flew more than 6,000 hours as a B-29 flight engineer, pilot and engineering observer, as well as a pilot in fighter, attack, bomber, cargo and training aircraft.
- Designed Captivair flight trainers/simulators for aircraft such as the P-51, P-47 and P-38.
- Honored by NASA as one of 47 most significant women in aerospace.
- Earned the Federal Aviation Administration's Charlie Taylor Master Mechanic Award.
- Named a Maryland Pioneer in Aviation.
- Helped restore aircraft for 10 years at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum's Paul E. Garber Restoration Facility.
- Led three aircraft restoration projects, which took about three years apiece, while at Garber, and helped restore the cockpit of the Enola Gay.
- Inducted into the Women in Aviation Pioneer Hall of Fame.
- Received Order of Merit from the World Aerospace Education Organization.

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